

Side Trip, Part I

by Timothy Zahn

The hazy edge of the planet was just disappearing from beneath the *Hopskip*'s control room viewport, and Haber Trell was trying to nurse a little more power from the ship's as-always finicky engines, when his partner finally reappeared from her tour aft. "Took you long enough," Trell commented as she dropped into the copilot seat beside him. "Any trouble?"

"No more than usual," Maranne Darmic told him, digging a hand underneath the silvered clasp tying her dark-blond hair back out of the way and scratching vigorously at her scalp. "The cargo straps managed to hold through that classic signature liftoff of yours. I'd say we didn't get rid of all the itch mites in the hold, though."

"Never mind the vermin," Trell growled. Next time they had a twenty-grade unbalanced cargo, he promised himself darkly, he'd make *her* do the liftoff. See how smoothly *she* managed it. "How about our passengers?"

Maranne sniffed. "I thought you didn't want to hear about vermin."

"Watch it, kiddo," Trell warned. "They're paying good money for us to smuggle these blasters out to Derra IV."

"And obviously don't trust us ten centimeters with them," Maranne countered. "They wouldn't be babysitting them like this if they did."

Trell shrugged. "Can't say I really blame them for being cautious. Ever since that big defeat or whatever it was out in the Yavin system, the Empire's been spitting fire in fifteen directions at once. I've heard that some of the independents hauling Rebellion stuff decided it was safer to take the advance money, dump the cargo, and burn space for better havens."

"Yeah, well, I don't like hauling for desperate people," Maranne said, shifting the focal point of her scratching to a spot farther down the back of her neck. "They make me nervous."

"If they weren't desperate, they wouldn't be paying so well," Trell pointed out reasonably. "Don't worry, this'll be the last time we have to deal with them."

"I've heard *that* before," Maranne said, sniffing again. The proximity-sensor alert began to warble, and she leaned forward to key for a readout. "Sure, this'll pay for the engine upgrades you want; but then you'll want sensor upgrades, and--"

She broke off. "What?" Trell demanded.

"Star Destroyer," she said grimly, activating the weapons section of her board and keying in the power boosters. "Coming up fast behind us."

"Terrific," Trell growled, checking the nav computer. If they could escape to lightspeed... but no, the ship was still too close to the planet. "What's their vector?"

"Straight toward us," Maranne told him. "I suppose it's too late to dump the cargo and try to look innocent."

"Freighter *Hopskip*, this is Captain Niriz of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Admonitor*," a gruff voice boomed from the speaker. "I'd like a word with you aboard my ship, if I may."

The last word was punctuated by a single gentle shiver running through the deck beneath them as a tractor beam locked on. "Yeah, I'd say it's definitely too late to dump the cargo," Trell sighed. "Let's hope they're just on a fishing expedition."

He keyed for transmission. "This is Haber Trell aboard the *Hopskip*," he said. "We'd be honored to speak with you, Captain."

* * *

"Well," Captain Niriz said, his voice echoing across the vast emptiness of the hangar deck as he eyed the four beings standing in front of him. "Most interesting. Our records show the *Hopskip* as having two crew members, not four." His gaze paused on Rij Winward. "Newly hired, are you?"

"Our previous ship had to leave Tramanos in something of a hurry," Rij told him, striving to keep his voice casual. The fake ID the Rebellion had provided him was a good one, but if the Imperials decided to dig past it they would undoubtedly come up with his recent connection with the Mos Eisley police on Tatooine. That wasn't a connection he was anxious for them to find. "We needed a ride to Shibric," he continued, "and since Captain Trell was going that way, he was kind enough to offer us passage."

"For a hefty fee, I imagine," Niriz said, his eyes shifting to the muscular Tunroth standing at Riiij's right. "Rare to see a Tunroth in these parts. You're a certified Hunter, I presume?"

"*Shturlan*," Rathe Palror rumbled, his voice almost subsonic.

"That's a twelfth-class Hunter," Riiij translated, trying to draw Niriz's attention back to him. Palror's distinguished service with Churhee's Riflemen would raise even more eyebrows than Riiij's own record if the Imperials found it.

"Excellent," Niriz said. "A Hunter's talents may prove useful on this mission."

At Riiij's left, Trell cleared his throat. "Mission?" he asked carefully.

"Yes." Niriz gestured, and a lieutenant standing beside him stepped forward and offered Trell a datapad. "I want you to take a cargo to Corellia for me."

"Excuse me?" Trell asked carefully as he took the datapad. "*You want me* to--?"

"I need a civilian freighter for this job," Niriz said. His voice was gruff, but Riiij could hear a distinct undertone of distaste. "I don't have one. You do. I also don't have time to locate someone else to do the job. You're here. You're it."

Riiij craned his neck to look over Trell's shoulder at the datapad, his earlier trepidation about their IDs and cargo giving way to cautious excitement. For a Star Destroyer captain to ask for help of any sort -- especially from a scruffy civilian freighter pilot -- was practically unheard of. It implied urgency and desperation; and anything that bothered a senior Imperial officer that much was definitely something a good Rebel agent ought to look into. "What do you think?" he prompted.

Trell shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "It'll throw our schedule all toblazes and back."

Riiij ran a series of highly vulgar words through his mind, making sure the frustration didn't show on his face. Trell, unfortunately, was *not* a Rebel agent, good or otherwise, and he clearly wanted nothing to do with any of this. "It wouldn't take all that long," he cajoled carefully. "And all good citizens have a duty to help out."

"No," Trell said firmly, offering the datapad back to the lieutenant. "I'm sorry, Captain, but we just don't have time. Our cargo's due on Shibric--"

"Your cargo consists of six hundred cases of Pashkin sausages," Niriz interrupted coldly. "I presume you're aware that the governor has recently decreed that all foodstuff exports now require an Imperial license."

Trell's mouth dropped open a couple of millimeters. "That's impossible," he said. "I mean, the inspectors didn't say anything about that."

"Just how recent was this decree?" Maranne asked suspiciously.

Niriz gave her a thin smile. "Approximately ten minutes ago."

Riiij felt his stomach tighten. Urgency and desperation, indeed. "Off-hand, I'd say we've been set up," he murmured to Trell.

Niriz's eyes flicked to Riiij, returned to Trell. "I am, however, prepared to waive that requirement this one time," he continued. "Provided you're prepared in turn to deliver your sausages a little late."

"As opposed to not delivering them at all?" Trell countered.

Niriz shrugged. "Something like that."

Trell looked at Maranne, who shrugged. "It's a two-day round trip to Corellia from here," she said. "Add in delivery time, and we're talking three days, tops. It'll be a scramble, but our schedule can probably absorb that."

"Not that we have much choice in the matter." Trell looked back at Niriz. "I guess we'd be delighted to help you out, Captain. What's the cargo, and when do we leave?"

"The cargo is two hundred small boxes," Niriz said. "That's all you need to know about it. As for departure, you'll leave as soon as your sausages are offloaded and the new cargo put aboard."

At Riiij's side, Palror rumbled again, and Riiij had to fight to keep his own face expressionless. If some bored Imperial took it into his head to poke around beneath the top three layers of sausages in each box...

"Don't worry, we'll keep them cool," Niriz promised. "There won't be any spoilage."

"I'm sure they'll be safe," Trell said. "Where does this cargo of yours go?"

"Your guide will fill you in on those details," Niriz said, gesturing behind them. Riiij turned to look--

And felt the breath catch in his throat. Stepping around the stern of the *Hopskip* toward them, his stained Mandalorian armor glittering in the overhead light --

Trell swore under his breath. "Boba Fett."

"It's not Fett," Niriz corrected. "Merely, shall we say, an admirer of his."

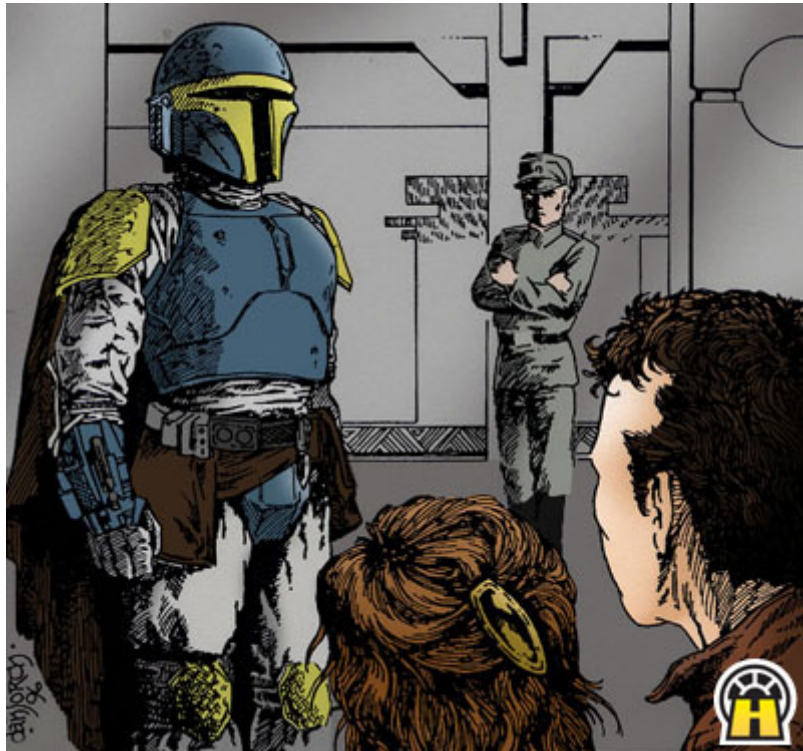
"A former admirer," the armored figure corrected, his voice dark and muffled. "The name is Jodo Kast. And I'm better than Fett."

"Not that that means much," Niriz said, his lip twisting. "I've always found that a competent stormtrooper could handle any three bounty hunters without working up a sweat."

"Don't push it, Niriz," Kast warned. "Right now you need me more than I need this job."

"I need you less than you might think," Niriz retorted. "Certainly less than you need an Imperial pardon for that mess you left on Borkyne--"

"Gentlemen, please," Trell jumped in hastily. "I'm a businessman, with a schedule to keep. Whatever your differences, I'm sure you can lay them aside until this job is finished."



Niriz was still glowering, but he gave a reluctant nod. "You're right, Merchant. Fine. You and your crew can rest in the ready room over there until the cargo's been transferred. As for you--"

He leveled a finger at Kast. "I'd like to see you in the bay control office. There are a few things I want to make sure you understand." Kast nodded gravely. "Of course. Lead the way."

* * *

Niriz stepped into the bay control office, the armored figure striding in right behind him. The door slid closed; and at long last Niriz could let the unnatural stiffness drain out of his posture. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at this, sir," he apologized. "I hope I did all right."

"You did just fine, Captain," the other assured him, reaching up to twist his helmet free and pull it off. "Between this armor and your performance all four of them are completely convinced that I'm Jodo Kast."

"I hope so, sir," Niriz said, his stomach tight with concern as he gazed at those glowing red eyes. "Admiral ... I have to say one last time that I don't think you should do this. At least not personally."

"Your concern is noted," Grand Admiral Thrawn said, running a gauntleted hand through his blue-black hair. "And appreciated, as well. But this is something I can't delegate to anyone else."

Niriz shook his head. "I wish I could say I understood."

"You will," Thrawn promised. "Assuming this plays out as anticipated, you'll have the entire story when I return."

Niriz smiled, thinking about all the campaigns he and the Grand Admiral had been through together out in the Unknown Regions. "When hasn't something you planned gone as anticipated?" he asked dryly.

Thrawn smiled faintly in return. "Any number of times, Captain," he said. "Fortunately, I've usually been able to improvise an alternate approach."

"That you have, sir," Niriz sighed. "I still wish you'd reconsider. We could put one of my stormtroopers in the Mandalorian armor, and you could direct him by comlink from somewhere nearby."

Thrawn shook his head. "Too slow and awkward. Besides, Thyne's fortress will certainly have a full-spectrum surveillance set up. They'd pick up any such transmission and either tap in or jam it."

Niriz took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

Thrawn smiled again. "Don't worry, Captain, I'll be fine. Don't forget, there's an Imperial garrison nearby. If necessary, I can always call on them for help."

He slid the helmet back over his head and fastened it in place. "I'd better go supervise the cargo transfer -- we wouldn't want Merchant Trell's precious sausages to be damaged. I'll see you in a few days."

"Yes, sir," Niriz said. "Good luck, Admiral."

* * *

"If they did, I wasn't looking either," Corran told him. "Either Brown Jacket and his pals are incredibly stupid, or else something very odd is going on."

"Either way, I doubt Thyne will simply pass on it," Hal said. "Did Brown Jacket happen to mention where they could be contacted?"

"No, but Sajsh has that covered," Corran said. "He said they might want the owner of the booth next to his and suggested they come back about seven."

"Where they'll be asked to have a quiet conversation with a group of Black Sun heavies." Hal stretched his neck to peer over the crowd. "Well, well -- the plot thickens. Look who our innocents have hooked up with."

Corran rose up on tiptoes. There was Brown Jacket and his friends; and with them --

"I'll be shragged," he breathed. "Is that Boba Fett?"

"No, I don't think so," Hal said. "Possibly Jodo Kast, though I'd have to get a closer look at the armor to be sure."

"Well, whoever it is, we've definitely moved into the big time," Corran pointed out. "Mandalorian armor doesn't come cheap."

"When you can find it at all," the elder Horn agreed. "This is getting odder by the minute. I take it you've had some thoughts already?"

"Only one, really," Corran said. The group was moving off again, and he and his father set off to follow. "Thyne wouldn't be stupid enough to kill them out of hand, certainly not until he knows who they are and what their connection is to Crisk. That probably means bringing them to the fortress."

"And you think you might be able to invite yourself along?"

"I know it's risky--"

"'Risky' isn't exactly the word I had in mind," Hal interrupted. "Getting into the fortress is only the first step, you know. You think you'll be able to simply march up to Thyne, slap the restraints on him in the name of Corellian Security, and march him out?"

"We do have the legal authority to do that, you know," Corran reminded him.

"Which means nothing at all inside his stronghold," Hal countered. "You have any idea how many CorSec agents have gone after top Black Sun lieutenants like Thyne and simply vanished?"

Corran grimaced. "I know," he said. "But that's not going to happen this time. And if getting into the fortress is only the first step, it still is the first step."

The elder Horn shook his head. "'Risky' still doesn't begin to cover it. For starters, we don't even know what game Brown Jacket and his Mandalorian friend are playing."

"Then it's time we found out," Corran said. "Let's stay close and see if we can find an opportunity to introduce ourselves."

* * *

They had gone perhaps two blocks -- though where Kast was leading them Trell hadn't the faintest idea -- when they heard the shout.

"What was that?" Rijj demanded, looking around.

"There," Palror rumbled, pointing his thick central finger to the left. "Argument starting."

Trell craned his neck. There was an open-air tapcafe that direction, with a long serving bar at the rear and perhaps twenty small tables spread out in the open space in front of it beneath a wide, Karvrish-style woven-leaf canopy. A slightly-built man wearing a proprietor's apron was standing in the middle of the dining area, a half dozen large and rough-looking men wearing mercenary shoulder patches looming in a threatening circle around him. The chairs from a nearby table were scattered back or lying on the ground, indicating a quick and unruly departure from them. "I think the argument's over," he said. "It's gone straight to trouble now."

"Come on," Rijj said, angling that direction. "Let's check it out."

"Leave it alone," Kast ordered. "It's none of our business." But Rijj and Palror were already heading off through the crowd.

"Blast," Trell growled. Stupid idealistic gornt-brained Rebels -- "Come on, Maranne."

A line of onlookers had started to form at the edge of the tapcafe by the time he and Maranne broke through the stream of pedestrians. Rijj and Palror were already to the mercenaries, who had opened their circle around the tapcafe proprietor in order to face this new distraction.

And now Trell could see something he hadn't been able to before. Standing beside the proprietor, clinging tightly to his waist in terror, was a young girl. Probably his daughter; certainly no more than seven years old.

Trell hissed a curse between his teeth. It took a particularly vile form of lowlife to threaten a child. But that didn't mean he was going to follow Rijj's lead and charge in blindly like a mad Jedi Knight on Cracian thumperback. "Backup left," he murmured to Maranne. "I'll take right."

"Right," she murmured back. Dropping his hand casually onto the grip of his blaster, Trell started drifting behind the ring of onlookers to the right--

And with a suddenness that startled him, the fight started. Not with blasters, which had been his main fear, but with hands and feet as the two closest mercenaries lashed out at Rijj and Palror. With three-to-one odds on their side, the mercs must have felt weapons to be unnecessary.

They got a shock. Rijj had clearly had some good training in unarmed combat, and Palror was a lot faster than Trell would have guessed from the alien's bulk. Rijj's counterattack sent his opponent reeling back; Palror's threw his merc slamming back with a horrendous crash into one of the other tables, sending it spinning and scattering its chairs across the floor.

Someone swore viciously. The downed merc scrambled to his feet and rejoined his comrades, their former casual semicircle now reformed into a deadly, no-nonsense combat line facing their attackers. The proprietor had taken advantage of the distraction to hustle his daughter back across to the bar; heaving her up and over to the relative safety behind it, he turned back to watch.

For a long moment the combatants stood motionless facing each other. Trell kept drifting toward his chosen backup position, his eyes on the mercs, his hand tightening on his blaster. Would they draw now, in which case Rijj and Palror were probably dead? Or would sheer pride dictate they beat such insolent opponents bloody with their bare hands?

The watching crowd was obviously wondering the same thing. Trell could feel their tension, their excitement, their bloodlust... And then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted movement to his left. The mercs caught it, too, anger-filled eyes shifting that direction--

Their expressions changed, just slightly. Frowning, Trell risked a look of his own.

Jodo Kast had stepped forward out of the ring of onlookers. For a moment the bounty hunter just stood there, gazing silently at the scene. Then, stepping to one of the tables at the edge of the tapcafe, he pulled out a chair and sat down. Crossing his legs casually beneath the table, he folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head slightly to one side. "Well?" he asked mildly.

Roaring obscure and probably obscene battle cries, the mercs waded in.

"No," Kast said.

"I said no," Kast told him. His hands were in his lap now, concealed under the table, but his legs were still casually crossed. "You've had your fun; but I need them alive."

"You've had your fun," Kast repeated, but this time there was frosty metal glittering in his voice. "Leave it and go. Now."

And abruptly, right in the middle of his sentence, he dropped his hand to his blaster and yanked it from its holster.

The merc had good reflexes, all right. In that split second he froze, his weapon not quite cleared of its holster, staring from beneath thick eyebrows at the four blasters suddenly pointed at him from the circle of people around the tapcafe.

Four. Two people down from Maranne, a bulky middle-aged man also had a blaster trained steadily on the mercs... and out of the corner of his eye, Trell could see the fourth blaster sticking out from his side of the crowd. Held with equal steadiness.

"We're not playing," Kast said icily. "As I said: leave it and go. If you don't--"

"I promise you will regret it," Kast finished calmly. "This is your final chance."

stacked too high against him. "I'll be watching for you, bounty hunter," he breathed, straightening up from his combat crouch. "We'll finish this some other time."

Kast bowed his head slightly. "Whenever you're tired of life, mercenary."

The merc gave a hand signal. The others helped their two casualties to their feet -- one groggily starting to come to, the other still in need of basic portage and the group straggled their way through the onlookers and out into the crowd.

Kast waited until they were out of sight. Then, pushing back his chair, he stood up, the blaster he'd used on the merc's weapon already secreted back in whatever hidden holster it had been drawn from. "The show's over," he announced, looking around at the bystanders. "Stay and buy a drink, or get moving."

The proprietor was already beside Riiij and Palror, helping the former to a sitting position, when Trell and Maranne reached them. "You all right?" Maranne asked, offering Palror a hand.

The Tunroth waved it away. "I am not hurt," he said, rolling to his feet and flexing an elbow experimentally. "I was merely temporarily disabled."

"You're lucky the condition wasn't permanent," Trell reminded him. "You should have left it alone like Kast told you to."

"Yeah," Riiij said, holding his stomach as he got to his feet with the proprietor's assistance. "Thanks, Kast. Though I wouldn't have minded if you'd stepped in a little earlier. Say, before they started pounding on us?"

"Six mercenaries wouldn't have backed down in front of three blasters," Kast told him. "I needed you to take some of them out first."

He half turned. "If I'd known it would be five blasters instead of three, I might have moved sooner."

Trell turned to look. The two men who'd drawn with them were standing there watching. "Thanks," he said. "I wouldn't have counted on getting that kind of help in a place like this."

"No problem," the older man shrugged. "The Brommstaad Mercenaries have always had a tendency to consider themselves above the bounds of normal civilized behavior. And I've never liked it when children get threatened."

"Besides which," the younger man added, "we were starting to get thirsty anyway."

"Drinks?" the proprietor asked eagerly. "Of course; drinks for all of you. And meals, too, if you are hungry -- the finest I have to offer."

"We'll take the long table in the back," Kast said. "And some privacy."

"Yes, good sir, immediately," the proprietor said. Giving them a quick bow, he scurried off toward the table Kast had indicated.

"My name's Hal, by the way," the older man said. "This is my partner Corran."

Trell exchanged nods with them. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Trell; this is Maranne, Riiij, Palror, and--"

"Call me Kast," Kast cut him off. "Son or nephew?"

Hal blinked. "What?"

"Is Corran your son or nephew?" Kast amplified. "There's a family resemblance about the eyes."

"People have mentioned that before," Corran spoke up. "Actually, it's just coincidence. As far as we know, we're not related." Kast nodded once, slowly. "Ah."

"The table seems ready," Hal said, pointing that direction. "Shall we go sit down?"

* * *

"Oh, sure," Hal said, taking a sip from his second drink. "Everyone around here has heard of Borbor Crisk. Fairly small-time criminal, though, as criminals go -- strictly local to the Corellian system. Of course, if you're looking for impressive intersystem criminals, we've got some of those, too."

"We're not interested in impressiveness," Trell pointed out. "Criminal or otherwise. We've got a cargo to deliver to this Crisk character, and then we're out of here."

"Yes, you mentioned that," Corran agreed, eyeing the other and trying to read him. It was hard to believe these people were really the simple errand boys they appeared, especially after the incident with the mercenaries. But if this was some kind of deeply clever plan, he was blamed if he could figure it out.

At least, not from the outside. It was about time he made his pitch to get a little closer to the middle. "The thing is this," he went on, looking around the table. "Two things, actually. Number one: considering who Crisk is, your cargo is probably illegal and certainly valuable. That means that you not only have to worry about Corellian Security coming down on you, but also other criminals who might try to take it off your hands. And number two--" he hesitated, just slightly "--the reason Hal and I came to Corellia in the first place was hoping to find jobs with Crisk's organization."

"You're kidding," Riiij said. "Doing what?"

"Anything, really," Hal said. "Our last job went really sour, and we need to recoup our losses."

"That's why we were following you, see," Corran said, trying for the proper balance of assertiveness and embarrassment. "I overheard Trell talking about Crisk, and thought -- well--"

"We thought maybe we could go with you when you went back to see him tonight," Hal took the plunge.

Trell and Maranne exchanged glances. "Well--"

"We don't actually *know* we're seeing him tonight," Riiij pointed out. "That other booth owner may not know anything more about Crisk than Sajsh did."

"That's a good point," Trell agreed, throwing an odd look at Kast. "This could be nothing but a blind alley."

"Well, in that case, you'll need help finding him," Hal said with a wonderfully genuine-sounding eagerness. "Corran and I are locals -- we have all sorts of contacts around the area. We can help you find him."

"One of you can go," Kast said.

Corran looked at the bounty hunter, blinking in mild surprise. It was the first time he'd spoken since they'd sat down at the table. "Ah -- good," he said. "Just one of us?"

"Just him," Kast said, nodding toward Hal. "Trell and the Tunroth will go with him. I'll be behind as rearguard."

"What about Riiij and me?" Maranne asked.

"You two and Corran will go back to the ship," Kast told her. "You'll transfer the cargo onto the ship's landspeeder so it'll be ready for delivery."

Trell and Maranne eyed each other again, and Corran could see neither was particularly happy with the arrangement. It was equally clear, though, that neither was all that eager to argue the point with the bounty hunter. "All right," Trell said with a grimace. "Fine. What happens if no one at that other booth knows where Crisk is either?"

"That won't be a problem," Kast said. "Trust me."

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"Interesting person, Jodo Kast," Hal commented as the three of them headed back toward Sajsh's booth. "Have you worked with him long?"

"This is the first time," Trell told him, looking around uneasily. There were far fewer shoppers at this hour than there had been earlier, and despite his innate dislike of crowds he found himself feeling unpleasantly exposed right now. "Actually, we're not working with him so much as we are working for him. Palror, can you see where he's gotten to?"

"No, don't turn around," Hal said quickly. "We might be under observation, and we don't want to tip them off that we've got a rearguard."

Trell threw him a sideways look. There was something in his voice right then that emphatically did not belong in a down-luck drifter. A tone of authority, spoken by a person who was used to having his orders obeyed...

Palror rumbled. "Trouble," he said.

Trell craned his neck. He could see Sajsh's booth ahead now, closed up for the night.

The booth beside it, the booth they were headed for, was also closed.

"Great," he growled, stopping. "Still no one there."

"No, don't stop," a soft voice came from behind him. Trell felt his heart seize up.

"What?"

"You heard the man," a different voice said, this one coming from behind Hal. "Keep walking."

With an effort, Trell got his feet moving again. "Are you with Borbor Crisk?"

There was a snort. "Hardly," the first voice said with obvious contempt. "Keep it casual, and don't try to be clever. We'd prefer to deliver you in fully working condition."

Trell swallowed hard. "Where are we going?"

"For now, behind Sajsh's booth," the other said. "After that... you'll see."

"I'm sure," Trell murmured, heart pounding in his ears. Still, there was one thing the kidnapers didn't know. Jodo Kast, one of the finest bounty hunters in the galaxy, was somewhere behind them. Any minute now he would jump out from wherever he was hiding, blasters blazing with micron accuracy, and flip the tables completely on them. Any minute now, and they'd hear the roar of blasters. Any minute now...

He was still waiting for that minute as the kidnapers herded the three of them aboard a speeder truck, sealed the doors, and drove off into the gathering dusk.

